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ABSTRACT

Data from recent international conferences and existing studies show that adult literacy research questions pursued by academicians and those pursued by practitioners are markedly different. Research concerns expressed by these two groups, in both developed and developing countries, are based on different assumptions regarding the nature, distribution, uses, and potential of literacy. The academicians' emphasis on the complexity of literacy as a representational act and their skepticism about its imputed benefits contrasts with the practitioners' belief in the power of literacy to foster both individual and collective sociopolitical transformation. The assumptions have led to research concerns that show minimal overlapping; consequently, the two groups continue to act independently, with minimal support. It might be possible for the two approaches to be complementary. The academicians' emphasis on literacy as a complex act of cognition could illuminate the understanding of learners in literacy programs and influence teachers and program success. Theories of human learning and cognition could make contributions to practice. In addition, although women constitute 63 percent of the world's illiterate people, neither academicians nor practitioners give gender issues the attention they warrant. (27 references) (NLA)

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ADULT LITERACY: VIEWS FROM THE IVORY TOWER AND THE GRASS ROOTS

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ABSTRACT

Drawing on data from recent international conferences and existing studies, this article shows that adult literacy research questions pursued by academicians and practitioners are markedly different. Research concerns expressed by these two groups, in both developed and developing countries, are based on different assumptions regarding the nature, distribution, uses, and potential of literacy. The academicians' emphasis on the complexity of literacy as a representational act and their skepticism about its imputed benefits stands in contrast with the practitioners' belief in the power of literacy to foster both individual and collective sociopolitical transformation. These assumptions have led to research concerns that evince minimal overlapping; consequently these two groups continue to act independently, with limited mutual support.

Introduction

The world of literacy work is wide and diverse. It comprises academicians and researchers in universities and related centers, practitioners managing literacy programs and other forms of adult education, and government officials from various sectors. But the number of those involved is almost as large as the gaps that exist between them. They differ in the ways they define the phenomenon of "literacy," the importance they attribute to it, and the areas of research to which they would give priority attention.

These differences could be mutually enriching, yet the contributions that have been made by the two groups have not been communicated to each other. It has been observed in fact that "some of the disciplines most intimately connected to frontier research on literacy are farthest from literacy practitioners" (Philadelphia Proceedings, 1990).

Individuals working on literacy in academia include professionals from such disciplines as anthropology, social psychology, education, and, more recently, the cognitive sciences. Those involved in the administration and implementation of literacy programs include educators with formal teaching credentials, those without such certificates, and some individuals with more practical experience than formal training. My discussion of practitioners focuses upon initiatives being conducted by grass-roots groups, usually outside the state.

This paper examines the research issues raised by both academicians and practitioners with the objective of producing clear profiles about these two groups. It will argue that the

understanding of the differences that characterize these groups will help identify areas where progress is likely to be made and areas where incompatible interests are likely to continue.

In the discussion of research issues that follows, the reader should note that issues academicians consider important are already reflected in their ongoing research activities. In the case of practitioners, many of their concerns have not materialized in research studies; their concerns are mentioned here not because they have been studied but because they are much part of the desired, if unfulfilled, agenda of the practitioners.

A second point must be made about literacy research. Literacy research regarding children (early literacy) is well accepted and takes place under labels such as reading and writing (see pertinent review by Steiz, 1981). In contrast, research on adult literacy has second status in academia, judging from the fact that few engage in it. Practitioners receive limited funds to research their programs, most of the support going instead to their implementation. Also, they tend to possess, or perceive themselves as having, limited research skills. Hence, they seldom produce research studies.

Data Sources

It is difficult to summarize the views of groups as extensive and scattered as academicians and literacy practitioners. The views presented in this paper have been developed through exposure with both sets of groups in conferences, regional meetings, and personal interviews. I draw material from the conference on "Literacy: What is to Be Done"

held at Simon Fraser University in 1984 and reported in the book by de Castell, Luke and Egan (1986). I also base my perspectives on data materials I collected through personal participation at the conference in Philadelphia on "World Literacy: Policy and Research Dimensions" on 4-7 October 1990, the Worldwide NGO Consultation Forum on Literacy held in Windhoek (Namibia) on 14-19 October 1990, the conference on "Women and Literacy: Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow," held in Hasselby Slott (Sweden) on 8-10 June 1989, and the Latin American assembly on "Popular Education in the 90s" held in Guanajuato (Mexico) on 9-14 November 1987.

In addition, I include data gathered through interviews with a wide range of individuals working on literacy during 1988-89; this information was obtained in the context of a feasibility study on the creation of a world literacy center. The pertinent academic literature has also been reviewed. In short, while the perspectives I present may not come from a systematic sampling, they are based on direct contact with highly active individuals in leading positions in the fields of education and literacy.

Perspectives from the Ivory Tower

Although universities are social institutions that both reflect and shape society, it is also true that they enjoy spaces of autonomy and are able to develop research agendas with a considerable level of discretion. As noted earlier, in academia literacy has focused primarily on children, except for those discussions around the concept of "functional literacy." This term has been used primarily when assessing the reading abilities

of young adults, mostly those still in high school.

Definition and Measurement. Academicians seek the most precise and complete way to define literacy (cf. Seitz, 1981). Thus, they distinguish between its functions (what literacy can do for individuals) and its uses (what individuals can do with literacy skills) (Heath, 1989b). Concern has also been expressed as to whether literacy should be defined as just reading/writing or apply to other forms of manipulation of symbols and meanings (Steiz, 1981). Such a concern can achieve at times relativistic extremes as in the statement: "If people have other forms of processing information, why should we give priority to reading and writing?" (Philadelphia Proceedings, 1990), a position that seems to underestimate the use of print in an increasingly technological society. The definitional debate can become empty at times, such as when it concerns whether the opposite of functional literacy is functional illiteracy or nonfunctional literacy. Ironically, academicians have aided to the confusing definition of literacy by expanding the term to include "computer literacy," "cultural literacy," and "film literacy."

Some academicians have been critical of the attempt to separate people into literate and illiterate, arguing that illiterates are individuals to whom print is closed but who are not necessarily ignorant. They consider the term "illiterate" inappropriate inasmuch as it conveys an on/off situation. Criticizing the importance given to literacy, Street maintains that literacy is now being used to create an unnecessary distinction between people. In his words, "The great divide has

been re-established by the appeal to literacy, apparently without the offensive appeals to inherent cultural and intellectual superiority that discredited its early phases" (Street, 1989, p. 60). Social historian Graff (1986), makes a similar point when he attacks the conceptual dichotomies between literate and illiterate, written and oral, print and script for not describing actual circumstances.

Cognitive psychologists accept the notion of literacy/illiteracy but seek a broader definition of literacy, one in which other forms of transforming and conveying communication, i.e., other forms of "interpretation and manipulation of symbols" are considered (Philadelphia Proceedings, 1990). Anthropologists introduce a number of relativistic concerns. They raise the question of whether there are other ways of imparting language and knowledge existing in any society. In the view of some anthropologists a more effective way would be to examine the communication practices of a particular society. They contend that perhaps print literacy is not the predominant way; that poetry, songs, and other cultural practices function as the common and effective alternatives.

Developments in cognitive science are serving to formulate learning theories with implications for literacy. Bereiter (1990) identifies three emerging types of learning theories: those at the physical level, known as neurological theories of learning; those at the design level, which Bereiter terms the "the characteristic level of psychological theorizing"; and those at the intentional level, at which more humanistic or

philosophical theories may be found. Such theories seem to have expanded the kinds of questions about processing and interpreting information that are being raised. Thus, literacy research questions in academia today range from "how are we able to identify the letter 'a' in its infinite variations?" to "how are we able to understand text?" (Bereiter, 1990, p. 607).

Cognitive psychologists also see literacy as a complex representation system and they seem to be increasingly combining neurological and psychological theories of learning. A common concern held by such professionals is represented the assertions that "We need to understand better the processes by which the brain manipulates symbols, signs, and various kinds of stimuli to produce information" and "We need to understand more the processes of cognition involved in reading/writing" (Philadelphia Proceedings, 1990). For their part, sociolinguists state that, "To write is an action understood much before the act of reading" (Philadelphia Proceedings, 1990), thus underscoring that the attribution of meaning (reading) follows, rather than precedes, one's own production of meaning (writing).

Sociolinguists also consider that literacy is complex. Ferreiro (1990) describes writing as "a very complex representational system" (p. 10). While she has in mind mainly young children, she maintains that "It is important to accept the knowledge they are bringing with them to the school, without imposing upon them the burden of a common, preconceived standard of ignorance at the beginning and applying a unique standard of performance at the end" (p. 11). Ferreiro advises that we need

major conceptual changes, a more solid conception of literacy process. She deplores the fact that in recent years literacy has become less of a pedagogical subject and more of a political, sociological, and anthropological subject (Philadelphia Proceedings, 1990).

Academia in general shows a high degree of concern with what it sees as difficulties in the measurement of literacy (Steiz, 1981) and the extent to which this measurement should include quantitative and qualitative assessment. Additional questions have been raised about the identification of segments of literacy performance that may or may not represent "meaningful distinctions" such as letter naming, word writing, comprehension, and text production. There is some evidence that inconsistent measurements are reported through proxy reporting, self-reporting, direct performance assessment, and inferences from educational level (Philadelphia Proceedings, 1990). This concern with a clear methodology for measuring literacy is reflected in questions such as,

> Should adult literacy tests look like school reading tests, with multiple-choice questions built around excerpts from stories and short expository articles? Or should such assessments require appropriate responses to everyday literacy tasks, such as what benefits an insurance policy provides or how to reset the time on a digital thermostat? (Venezky et al., 1990, p. x).

Academicians have also expressed discomfort with tendencies to equate literacy with education/schooling. They see the latter as reflecting more than knowledge the effect of a long socialization experience in which values and norms regarding obedience, ability to complete tasks, responsibility, etc. are

inculcated. While it could be argued that literacy is a precursor to other forms of knowledge that are included in an individual's years of education, academicians have shown a preference for a clearcut measurement of literacy, often evinced in their research efforts to "isolate" the effects of literacy.

In academia there is no consensus as to whether the literacy acquisition process of adults is similar to that of children. Some, like Ferreiro, consider that divisions of literacy among child, young, and adult are "not useful." There is a recognition, however, that literacy demands of adults are different from those of children, for tasks such as reading exit signs while driving on a freeway at 55 miles per hour or reading subtitles on a foreign film--tasks which do not require higher levels of comprehension but demand reading speeds beyond those attained by the average fourth grader (Venezky, 1990, p. 2).

The Power of Literacy. Among researchers also there is substantial skepticism regarding the power of literacy to produce changes at either the individual or societal level. There is doubt that literacy brings about cognitive changes in reasoning, logical processes, and abstract thinking. Though these skeptical views frequently cite Scriber and Cole (1981) in their support, the contextual limitations of this study are usually not mentioned (e.g., the fact that the data used by these researchers was anchored in a non-Western society with limited access to print and thus not readily generalizable to other settings where the printed media is in much greater use). On the other hand, the academicians tend to be critical of the findings of Luria (1981) regarding cognitive changes among Soviet neoliterates,

basing their criticism on the assertion that Luria's data was too embedded in a revolutionary context in which many opportunities emerged for marginal groups and thus the confounded the impact of literacy with many other concurrent factors.

There is also doubt that literacy may play a role in individual social mobility (Heath, 1986b). Important among those academicians who have introduced a skeptical attitude toward literacy as a mechanism for social change is Graff (1979), whose study of the role of literacy in Canada in the 1900s found that literacy helped some individuals but did not create changes for deprived classes and ethnic groups. Graff asserts that literacy has been used to solidify social hierarchies, empower elites, and ensure that people lower in the hierarchy accept the values, norms, and beliefs of the elites (cited in Gee, 1988, p. 205). A subsequent review of the literature by sociolinguist Gee observes that evidence from Canada, the United States, and Britain shows that literacy served as "a socializing tool of the poor, was seen as a possible threat if misused by the poor (for an analysis of their oppression and to make demands for power), and served as a means for maintaining the continued selection of members of one class for the best positions in the society" (Gee, 1986, p. 734). The general conclusion of academicians seems to be that there is little evidence for the great transformative powers of literacy (although as seen in the previous quotation, they recognize that the upper classes feared its possible transformative skills). Moreover, as Gee contends (1988, p. 196), "where such evidence does exist, the role of literacy is always more complex and

contradictory, more deeply intertwined with other factors, than the literacy myth allows."

It could perhaps be argued that some academicians make it impossible for literacy to succeed by attaching to it unattainable claims. One such claim states that it was expected that,

> Literacy [would] lead to logical and analytic modes of thought; general and abstract uses of language; critical and rational thought; a skeptical and questioning attitude; a distinction between myth and history; the recognition of the importance of time and space; complex and modern governments (with separation of church and state), political democracy and greater social equity; economic development; wealth and productivity; political stability; urbanization, and contraception (lower birth rate) (Gee, 1988, p. 196).

Clearly, no single skill or amount of knowledge by itself can accomplish all these objectives.

Academicians are deeply aware that methods of learning literacy skills and functions of literacy vary considerably across society. Heath deplores the relatively small amount of research that gives us detailed insights on ways in which speakers in different communities "talk about" their language and how their views relate to their acquisition and retention of literacy skills. She says, "In particular we need studies of what happens to basic literacy skills once a formerly nonliterate group attains such skills. How are they extended and interrelated with social needs and functions so that they can be retained" (Heath, 1986a, p. 216; see also Heath, 1986b). While these concerns are reasonable, some of her conclusions may not be for they may cause governments to pay less attention to marginal groups. Consider for instance the statement that, "Much must be

known about the psychological and social consequences of both illiteracy and nonschooled literacy before pushing ahead with goals such as UNESCO's mission to eradicate illiteracy in the world before the year 2000" (Heath, 1986b, p. 19).

The problem with the skeptical attitude toward literacy and with the simultaneous call for unambiguous and complete knowledge about it before proceeding to demand it is that it seems to suggest also the converse--that literacy is not necessary and that all persons (including marginal groups) can accomplish desired sociopolitical objectives without it. Those who endorse the skeptical view of literacy--particularly among decision-makers--produce statements that have significant consequences on the priority given to literacy, such as when they consider literacy "at best as a worthy selective investment" (Philadelphia Proceedings, 1990, emphasis added).

Individual v. Collective Literacy. Among sociolinguists it is possible to consider whether literacy should be instilled at the individual or at the family level. Heath notes that "a restricted literate class can increase the range of functions of written language without increasing the size of the literate population" (Heath, 1986b, p. 16). Ferreiro (Philadelphia Proceedings, 1990) concurs with the notion of collective literacy--the acceptance that one person in the family or the community with the literacy ability can serve others. This view of delegated literacy is wholly at odds, as will be seen below, with the positions of literacy practitioners.

Contributions Made by Academia. Several areas have benefited from literacy research in academe. A few are reviewed

below.

Eisemon is one of the few researchers conducting investigations on the impact of literacy. In an investigation conducted with others (1990), Eisemon asserts that if literacy is to become functional, texts and tasks for the development and the measurement of literacy should be more naturalistic and include the teaching of procedures, not just narratives. In a study conducted by Eisemon and Nyamete (1990) of neoliterates in Kenya, they discovered that the decoding skills alone were not sufficient to follow instructions in the use of pesticides for small-scale agriculture. They concluded that literacy skills need to be accompanied by proper knowledge, in this case scientific knowledge about how chemicals operate on plants.

A second contribution has been the clear realization that any study of literacy needs to be grounded in the understanding of language and cognitive development. As Gee puts it, "Language and literacy acquisition are forms of socialization, in this case socialization into mainstream ways of using language in speech and print, mainstream ways of meaning, of making sense of experience" (1986, p. 742).

Third, academicians have brought attention to the need to interpret literacy events in relation to the larger sociocultural patterns which they may exemplify or reflect, such as patterns of care-giving roles, use of space and time, and age and sex segregation (Heath, 1986b; Gee, 1986). Sociolinguist Gee notes that "One does not think for oneself; rather, one always thinks for (really with and through) a group--the group which socialized

one into the practice of thinking" (Gee, 1988, p. 209). Hence, since the literacy practices of social groups "are always fully embedded in their whole repertoires of social practices, going well beyond language and literacy per se, we must study these groups as wholes" (Gee, 1988, p. 210).

Fourth, even within the definition of literacy as reading/writing, academicians have noticed various forms of literacy. Gee, for instance, recognizes that literacy is often confused with essay-text literacy, a form of making sense that is associated with mainstream middle and upper class groups and is best represented by the ideology and sometimes practice of academics (Gee, 1986, p. 731).

Summarizing the views and practices of academicians regarding literacy, it can be said that these persons spend much effort conceptualizing "literacy" and measuring it in precise ways. They tend to be uncertain of the individual and collective benefits of literacy. At the same time, they show a tendency to define print literacy programs in self-contained terms: seeing it as the ability to produce individuals who can read and write.

It must be noted that among those in academia, there is some diversity. Those in the field of education tend to be more sensitive to notions of empowerment and liberation than the scholars coming from linguistics, anthropology, and psychology. The work of the educators have concentrated on analyzing and evaluating literacy programs, particularly literacy campaigns (Arnove, 1986; Arnove and Graff, 1987; Bhola, 1984). More recently, some work has focused on the politics of adult education, which includes discussion of how the state responds to

literacy needs of marginal populations (Torres, 1990). Overall, this research has shown the relative advantages of coherent and politically-motivated mass literacy campaigns over incremental programs, and the tendency of many states to be sensitive to literacy needs only insofar as their actions provide them with a modicum of legitimacy.

Views from the Grass-roots

Literacy practitioners and administrators of literacy programs come from various walks of life as well as from diverse disciplines. In general, they are less formally trained than the academicians and are much more problem-solving oriented. Below we discuss the views they are likely to hold.

Adult Literacy as Different from Children's Literacy. Practitioners are much more likely than academicians to see in the learning process differences between adults and children. Also, they maintain that among adults one finds a much greater heterogeneity in ability (Flecha, 1990), which produces substantively different learning rates. In their view, adult illiterates, more so than children, are not totally illiterate; most can do some decoding, such as reading signs or recognizing a friend's signature. Further, they contend that adults' experience (not just the socialization of their group, as sociolinguists propose) must be utilized in any process of adult education.

Paradoxically, while practitioners consider that adults learn differently from children, they tend not to raise many questions about specifically how the learning process affects

adults or what teaching methods are suitable for them. They do ask, however, whether there is a better literacy/numeracy sequence for adults. From their experience, most believe that adults should start first with numeracy.

Implementation Issues. Practitioners take the need of literacy for all as unquestionable. Therefore, they would spend most of their research energies attempting to understand which are the effective strategies of literacy program implementation. Practitioners would like to obtain the knowledge they need to facilitate the implementation, design, and outreach of the best literacy programs. In particular, they would like to move into the massive expansion of literacy.

Their implementation concern covers several aspects:

(1) The question of instructors: How to select them effectively? How to train them appropriately? How to provide them with ongoing support? How to reduce the instability/turnover among them when monetary incentives are so limited?

(2) The question of literacy materials: How to develop culture-sensitive materials? How to respect most cultural values while transforming some of them? How to develop literacy materials that represent an appropriate transition between basic literacy and advanced literacy?

(3) The question of appropriate instructional methodologies. This concern has been identified in reference to the design of "effective lessons." Practitioners observe that sometimes a lesson that could be covered in a month takes three months. Multiple reasons may be at work for this: poor program

attendance due to survival demands, limited ability on the part of the adult learner, scant ability on the part of the teacher. Practitioners desperately need research on this issue.

(4) The question of the population to be served. Practitioners would also like to obtain more knowledge about the adults they are serving or seek to serve. What are the characteristics of literacy program participants? What physical, emotional, and cognitive needs do they have? What obstacles do they face regarding attendance and performance in literacy programs? Among those who have a concern for gender issues, additional questions include: How does the sexual division of labor affect differentially men and women? How do notions of sexuality control women's physical and psychological space? What obstacles emerge because of a particular point in the life cycle of the women participants?

(5) The issue of "points of entry" into literacy programs. This is of particular interest because of the practitioners' desire to know what problems and topics have a strong appeal among low-income, marginal people and therefore can serve as key entry points. Linked to this is a need for a greater understanding of community initiatives in literacy and related efforts to improve the community's socioeconomic condition. How can local community structures and institutions be mobilized to provide and sustain literacy programs? To what extent do men and women organize themselves and for what ends? A common question here also is the relative importance of health and income generation as strategies to introduce literacy.

Hautecour (1989) is an educator and literacy practitioner

who has given serious recognition to the problem of low enrollments. He observes that "the population on which an imperative and urgent 'need' has been projected is not coming forward" (p. 130). His experience, which echoes that of many practitioners, is that many organizations fail to attract the desired number of illiterates given the proportion of illiterates in their area. In his native Canada, literacy councils recruit volunteer tutors but do not succeed equally in the recruitment of volunteers to participate as learners in literacy programs. Consequently they are sometimes forced to abandon their literacy education or event to reorient themselves within a school environment in order to implement preventive measures. He notes that in Canada literacy programs reach no more than 1 percent of the illiterates and concludes that there is a need for greater research on "the conditions which are most acceptable and most desirable for the joint management of supply and demand" (1989, p. 140). The poor enrollment and retention of learners in literacy programs have often been noted by many literacy practitioners; it clearly typifies literacy programs across a wide range of physical settings in the Third World (Windhoek Proceedings, 1990).

An important concern with implementation derives from the difficulties of providing literacy to poor adults who face significant problems in health, food procurement, and access to printed materials. Practitioners also realize the limited possibilities of success of programs provided to individuals under unstable political and social conditions (e.g., refugees,

migrants). For instance, a common problem regarding women revolves around the issue of how to combine literacy with the development of other skills so that it becomes more appealing to them. The practitioners' own experience has taught them that the combination of health and literacy is particularly attractive to many women. A similar argument can be made for the combination of income-generation skills and literacy.

Literacy as an Individual Resource. Practitioners take literacy as a very important resource for everybody. Unlike anthropologists, practitioners would not be relativistic about the importance of print literacy. In their view, they must strengthen the weak individual so that he or she is not exploited by an intimidating social environment. Likewise, practitioners would oppose the notion of delegated literacy. Everybody needs literacy. In this position, there is a strong congruence between literacy practitioners and feminists, who both consider that each individual must play a role in the changing of his or her conditions and that of society. In consequence, literacy practitioners are very concerned with the often limited response of beneficiaries to literacy programs. They report some cases in which the sociocultural context does not see it necessary to acquire literacy skills to have a satisfactory existence. These examples have been reported frequently in rural areas in Africa. Practitioners have also expressed concern that many women do not seem to see the need for literacy.

Finally, practitioners would like to have access to or produce more evaluations of qualitative outcomes of literacy programs. There is a strong belief that there are extremely

successful programs taking place but that they need to be identified and documented.

Literacy as Politics. A stark contrast between practitioners and academicians emerges in the former's tendency to see literacy more as a political than a technical issue. Practitioners are often criticized by academicians for this position, since in the view of critics it amounts to not taking sufficiently into account the sociolinguistic aspects of the reading/writing process (Flecha, 1990).

The practitioners' emphasis on literacy as an act with political implications reflects the strong influence of the work of Paulo Freire, whose notion of "conscientization" clearly shifts literacy from the neutral category of information acquisition to one of challenging the information given to the poor and engaging them into "writing and rewriting the world" (Freire and Macedo, 1987, p. 35).

Practitioners often link literacy to the attainment of empowerment, the individual and collective capacity to affect his or her own destiny. As a concept in literacy, empowerment is seen as both a process and end. The process implies that learners must be active in their acquisition of literacy; this is seen as critical because if learners are to become agents in the process of social change they must prepare themselves for that role. This emphasis on empowerment leads practitioners to seek ways to involve adult learners in the design and implementation of literacy programs and to choose methodologies of instruction that are participatory.

Empowerment as process also implies a literacy content that enables individuals to understand their current condition and to gain a vision of an alternative society. In fact, the limited research that has occurred among practitioners seems to have concentrated on the identification of key generative words, as reportedly is occurring among literacy programs in Latin America (Windhoek Proceedings, 1990).

Many practitioners have a keen understanding of the political forces that operate to create adult illiteracy. In their view there is a political economy accounting for the limited attention the state gives to literacy programs. An important research agenda for many practitioners would be to know better this political economy and to identify with precision the spaces for effective work with the state. Linked to the recognition of the role of structural, macrosocial forces, is the tendency to see the role of individual motivations as secondary. In marked contrast with psychologists in academe, few practitioners would define a situation of low participation in literacy programs as one derived from low motivation on the part of the beneficiaries. On the other hand, it is not that all academicians are insensitive to the ideological role of literacy; they simply do not carry it far. For instance, Street does recognize that literacy is not neutral, that it has a social nature, and that it transmits an ideology by virtue of the context in which it is acquired and purveyed (Street, 1989, p. 60). But, would he continue the argument by asserting that literacy programs to be counterhegemonic would have to be outside the state?

The construction of literacy as political has led numerous practitioners to link the provision of literacy to the understanding of other social practices. In Latin America, for instance, literacy programs are often tied to discussion on human rights, local development, indigenous culture, and organization.

Practitioners, however, do not manifest a blind faith in literacy. Rather many of them consider it "just one small piece in a general struggle for democracy" (Hasselby Slott Proceedings, 1989). The questions that they ask in the path toward democracy are profound and include such questions as, How literacy skills can be effectively linked to development of a collective critical consciousness? How can this consciousness be linked to development of a mass movement? A concern underlying the latter question is how to move from a project intervention to action of massive proportions. Many practitioners, particularly those working in NGOS, realize that literacy programs to be successful will have to be stable and institutionalized. These programs will also need to be accompanied by socioeconomic development programs. This understanding creates an unresolved tension among many practitioners. They recognize, on the one hand, that sound national literacy policies by the state are necessary; on the other hand, they realize that the state many coopt and distort literacy programs to serve narrow interests such as those of employers, who are seen as interested in developing productive workers rather than workers with critical minds (Windhoek Proceedings, 1990). One additional concern that has emerged in the last five years is that of the likely negative impact of

structural adjustment policies on education provision, particularly literacy.

The Role of NGOs in Literacy. While academicians take for granted that the delivery agency is the regular school system, practitioners are more likely to consider the role of nonformal education agencies in the provision of literacy, both in the design and implementation agencies. This occurs because of the practitioners' concern with the creation of oppositional, contested meanings through the written world. Thus, practitioners would like to develop a deeper understanding of the work of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and the potential they offer for effective literacy programs. In nations with repressive governments, practitioners would seek knowledge regarding types of programs NGOs could develop to create democratic spaces. On the other hand, it is clear that even though NGOs are numerous and carry out extremely important development work, few actually conduct literacy work. Illustrative of this common situation is Pakistan, where there exist 5000 NGOs duly registered with the government but where only 40 to 50 are estimated to work on literacy (Windhoek Proceedings, 1990).

Literacy as Empowerment. Practitioners readily identify as a critical outcome of literacy its psychosocial impact, which includes empowerment, control of environment, and a critical view of society. They would put literacy in its immediate socioeconomic and political context. Moreover, practitioners would link literacy to a model of development where collective action is seen as desirable for structural change. Their

interest, therefore, would not be limited to the progress of individuals. In some cases, such as South Africa, literacy is seen as important because it is linked to task of liberation, as a means to organize the mass movement.

Practitioners are driven by a strong belief in the power of literacy to produce autonomous individuals (Windhoek Proceedings, 1990; Guanajuato Proceedings, 1987). Because of this position, many of the practitioners' action tends to be guided by a responsiveness to their clientele rather than predicated on pedagogical reasons. Thus, many practitioners would consider perfectly reasonable to let the people decide if they wanted to acquire first literacy skills or engage in an income-generating project. This concern for new readers to be transformed as soon as possible as agents of social transformation would prompt practitioners to prefer research that is participatory in nature and that uses qualitative research methodologies such as participant-observation and life histories.

Another important research concern among practitioners, linked to an effective empowering of individuals and collectivities, is that of the transition from literacy to postliteracy. If literacy is to give way to greater knowledge, what strategies can be used to move from neoliterates from simple to complex, yet accessible texts? How can literate environments be created in diverse communities?

Conclusions

Academicians and practitioners are pursuing different research agendas, agendas that are shaped by different

assumptions and concerns. While academe is making contributions in a more carefully defined and measured literacy, in understanding its functions and applications, and in describing the conditions under which literacy programs have occurred, it is producing relatively little to help the day-to-day activities of practitioners.

Because of the tradition of examining children's literacy, academicians do not address themselves to issues of power and unequal distribution of resources and how this affects the adults' desire or possibility to attain literate status. For the average academician a successful literacy program is one that creates effective and habitual readers. In contrast, for practitioners a successful literacy program would be one in which communities are made socially aware and mobilized for social transformation.

While the two camps are uncoupled, it might be possible for them to act complementarily. The academicians' emphasis on literacy as a complex act of cognition could illuminate the understanding of learners in literacy programs and thus influence the training of literacy teachers and the pedagogical success of literacy programs. Theories of human learning and cognition do stand to make contributions. The practitioners' concern with literacy as a necessary step in the quest for individuals to understand the political and technological nature of the contemporary world should help to establish a clear link between literacy and politics, which in turn would illuminate why the constraints of literacy so often surpass its promise.

Although women constitute 63 percent of the world's illiterates, a rate that is considerably higher in many developing countries, neither academicians nor practitioners give gender issues the attention they warrant. Among academicians there is a powerful silence. Among practitioners, despite their concern with empowerment and liberation, few look at gender issues. This situation is ironic because practitioners are generally very conscious of the political objectives and means of literacy. This is an inconsistent behavior, perhaps linked to the fact that patriarchal ideologies permeate most developing countries. Among those practitioners who are interested in gender issues (and which include women in their majority), there is a strong research interest in understanding the obstacles (family, cultural, societal) to women's literacy.

Recent developments forecast that the understanding of literacy as a processs of social transformation will likely continue to depend on grass-roots efforts. The African Charter for Popular Participation in Development and Transformation (Arusha 1990) defines the literacy rate as "an index of the capacity for mass participation in public debate, decision-making, and general development processes" (p. 31). This view is seldom shared in academia.

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